DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 979 PS 026 163

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TITLE What Does Gender Have To Do with It? (Male Teachers in Early Childhood Education).
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Caregiver Child Relationship; *Child Care Occupations; *Early Childhood Education; *Males; Sex; Sex Bias; Sex Differences; Sex Stereotypes; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Caregiver Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The role of male teachers in early childhood education can be examined from many perspectives, including the need for male teachers, advantages and disadvantages of being a male in the profession, or why there are not more of them. In order to find out what male teachers think about teaching at the early childhood level, a survey consisting of 26 multiple choice and objective questions probing these 3 areas was completed by 20 male educators. Results showed that most reported working in the field because they love working with children. There was no real consensus on whether the image male teachers present is different from that presented by women, but the majority felt they projected a gentle and fatherly image. Nearly all agreed that teachers could be just as, or even more, influential than a child's parents, but for different reasons. Half felt that a teacher's gender has no effect on how much a child learns; about 25 percent said gender was not an issue in their role as early childhood educators, while 25 percent said there were certain trust issues raised because of gender. Forty-five percent agreed that neither males nor females have particular advantages in the field of early childhood education, and 35 percent said that as a male teacher, parents are the hardest to "win over." Eighty percent said students do not treat males differently. Sixty percent felt the gender ratio of teachers should be equal. When asked what can be done to encourage more men to enter the field, 45 percent said to offer more money. (EV)

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ED 415 979

What Does Gender Have To Do With It?

(Male Teachers in Early Childhood Education)

Edwin Rodriguez

Fall, 1997

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Abstract

The article focuses on the role of male teachers in early childhood education, the advantages and disadvantages of being a male teacher, and why the profession of early childhood education continues to be dominated by female teachers.

Introduction

In 1988, a poll was taken on what effects, if any, teachers' race, gender, and ethnicity had on their students. This survey was the National Educational Longitudinal Study. Using this survey to concentrate solely on what effect the teachers' gender has on the lives of developing children, it is easy to see that there is a strong push to find out exactly what role the "father figure" or the influential male plays in the growth and development of these young individuals. Next to parents, teachers are probably the most influential individuals in children's lives; therefore, it is extremely relevant to look at how having male teachers in their lives can affect them (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, and Brewer, 1988, p. 547). Discussing men in educational roles requires us to look at the issue from several points of view. First, what is the role of male teachers in early childhood education? Second, what are the advantages and disadvantages of being a male in this profession? Finally, why does the profession of early childhood education continue to be dominated by females?

The Role of the Male Teacher in Early Childhood Education

The National Educational Longitudinal Study was conducted in 1988 (NELS), in an attempt to discover what effects a teacher's gender, race, and ethnicity have on the children they teach. (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, Brewer, 1995, p. 547) Children were tested in the fields of math, history, science, and reading in the eighth grade level and again in the tenth grade level. It was found that a teachers gender, race, or ethnicity, for that matter, had little influence on how well children of different races and genders learned. They did,

however, influence how the teachers behaved with and discussed their students from a subjective standpoint.

Particularly in the field of early childhood education, there are going to be some different role issues when the teacher present is male or female. It is important to note that teachers often present a "motherly" or "fatherly" role to students, more so to those who come from single-parent homes, or homes with unusual family situations. The teacher often plays the part of a stable adult figure, regardless of the student's home life. That is why it is seen as necessary by some schools that both men and women be represented in their teaching faculty (Allan, 1994, p. 2). If women represent the feminine side of society, then schools don't want that to be the only side projected to their students, for "...there follows a need for more 'real' men to model the sex role for boys. This rationale, along with generalized affirmative actions, has been a main reason for hiring men as elementary teachers"(p. 4).

Currently, men make up only twelve per cent of elementary teachers nationally. "In spite of the so-called crisis of masculinity, affirmative action, the decline of the family, absent fathers, and the role modeling rationale, the proportion of men has actually declined over the last twenty years (Annual Estimates of School Statistics, 1958/9, 1991/2, pp. 1-2)." Also, the majority of these male teachers are in upper elementary levels, leaving a very scarce number in the actual earliest of child care.

How do men perceive themselves as role models for these children? Men usually consider themselves a role model for their students, more so than their female colleagues. Women usually consider the teaching and the education their first and foremost duty in the

job. While men and women in this profession agree that there is a lacking of male influence in school programs and in children's' home and educational lives (McBride, 1996, p. 1), men perceive it to be important for the children to have male teachers for the male role model aspect of their jobs. Most men in this profession agree that there is an important need for the increased involvement of adult men in the lives of children (Allan, 1994, p. 6). What is interesting, though, is that men in early childhood care programs, do not lead the students to play more masculine games or to act in a more masculine manner. In contrast, most men in this field have a stronger feminine side themselves than men in the field of, say, engineering. They will encourage boys to play with dolls and kitchenettes, as well as encourage girls to play with trucks. They, like most female teachers believe in well-rounded development. (Robinson, 1988, p. 55). They want their students to know that their gender does not have to be a prison.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Male Teachers

The benefits for a male teacher in early childhood education come from several points of view. First, we need to look at how the children feel about this figure in their classroom. Do they learn just as well from a man as from a woman? Do they find it possible to confide in and be influenced by this new male figure in their lives? Second, we need to look at the position from a social standpoint. How do the school administrators feel and react when their youngest students (with and without biological fathers) have this man to look up to? Finally, we, of course, need to look at the advantages and disadvantages of being a male in the profession of early childhood education from the teacher's point of view. How does it feel to be in the minority gender within the

profession? How do the students react to them differently? How fulfilling is it to act as a teacher, a mentor, and occasionally, as a father figure to these developing youths?

Being a male in early childhood education, as rewarding as it may be, is not always easy. There are many disadvantages to aiming for a career in caring for and teaching young children. When we think of "affirmative action", more often than not we think about women in what are traditionally considered men's careers. Well, it is no secret that the profession of early childhood education is dominated by the female gender (Shaham, 1983-97, p. 5). This can present a problem for men in the profession. First of all, men who want to care for children are often looked at with suspicion as to their motives. It is okay for a woman to hug a child, but it does not seem as okay for a man to have physical contact with his students. Also, male teachers have to be extremely careful what they say to their students and how it can be interpreted. A large obstacle for men in this field is what the administrators have to go through. "Male teachers are more expensive to insure with liability insurance, because of the instances of false claims of sexual abuse or contact, schools don't like to hire male teachers"(Busby, 1994,p. 1). Some schools are completely anti-male in their selection of teaching staff. Therefore, it is technically harder for men to get jobs in this field. This fear of what might happen, has created a sort of reverse sexual chauvinism. This was emitted from fellow faculty members, as well as from students' parents.

The other largest factor which makes men leave this profession is the teacher's salary. Teachers are certainly not among the highest paid people in the country. When a

man is the main provider for his family, having such a low-paying job will discourage him from staying in the business (Robinson, 1988, p. 57).

On the other hand, there are many reasons which make being a child educator, male or female, very beneficial. First, it is a very fulfilling feeling to be able to help another human being. Many men who were interviewed on the subject said that it was an altruistic drive which led them to teach in the first place (Robinson, 1988, p. 55). It is also a great advantage to the students to have a male in the classroom to look up to and to learn from. Men offer a different perspective of the world especially to children who have a lack of adult men in their home lives. Most men who teach agree that they feel like a strong, influential, and healthy role model to their students, both boys and girls. Robinson adds that the teachers who touched him the most, and whom he will never forget, were all males (p. 55).

Why the Profession of Early Childhood Education Continues to be Dominated by Women

It seems as though men belong in the field of early childhood education for many good reasons, though the field continues to be dominated by the female gender. Yes, of course there are advantages to having a female teacher for the students to look up to and learn from, but few people ever consider the genuine advantages of having a male dominate in the classroom environment. Statistically, children (especially boys) have difficulty in certain aspects of life and relationships when they don't have an appropriate man to look up to and get the answers from (Levine, 1993, p. 10). But the profession is still largely employed by women.

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This can be contributed to several factors. First, women are thought of as the caretakers, therefore it seems only natural that they would be dominant in the caring and raising, and educating of children. However, within the results of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, there was no evidence that students learned more or better when their teacher was female. It seems that some of the only reasons to keep women dominant in the field are political and technical. First of all, more women strive to be in the education profession. Men often go for better paying, or more "manly" jobs. Even though there are many women who are the bread winners and the primary caretakers in their homes, it is still the majority of men who need to support their families. Therefore, men do not find it monetarily satisfying to stay in education (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, Brewer, 1995, pp. 547-561).

The biggest thing that keeps men from pursuing in careers in early childhood education is the threat of suspicion, false reports, and mostly, conviction of an abuse or harassment charge. Women are technically the motherly figures and many believe that that is what we need teaching our children. Though men have made stride in this field in the last few decades. Regarding teachers and professors on other levels, such as college, we can begin a whole other discussion on the positions filled by men and women (Chong, 1995, p. 1), but when it comes to the early childhood education, women still dominate.

It is agreed by all parties that it is necessary for children to have male role models in their lives, if not at home, then in the schools. There are many programs which are in the process of expanding their male involvement for the benefit of youths, such as Head Start (McBride, 1988, p. 1).

But, for now, women dominate the field, regardless of the benefits of having male teachers. Perhaps, if we can overcome the insecurities and fear in having males present in the lives of youths, than we can truly focus on the benefits (Robinson, 1988, p. 57). The role of male teachers in early childhood education can certainly be looked at from many perspectives, whether its the need for them, the advantages and disadvantages of them or why we don't have more of them. It is interesting to see the interest that has accumulated in this subject over the last few decades.

Information Based on Survey of Males in Early Childhood Education:

I wanted to find out what male teachers think about teaching at the early childhood level. I administered a survey including both multiple choice and objective answers to twenty-six questions related to the role of the male teacher in early childhood education, the advantages and disadvantages of male teachers, and why the profession of early childhood education continues to be dominated by women. Twenty males in the profession of early childhood education responded.

Out of those who answered, 50% were between the ages of 20 and 30, while 50% of them were between the ages of 31 and 40. 25% of them teach grades K-1, 55% teach grades 2-3, and 20% of them teach grades 4-5. 60% of the respondents have been teaching 1-5 years, 20% have been teaching 6-10 years, and 20% have been teaching 11-15 years. Most of those who responded (65%) reported that they are in the field of early childhood education because they love working with children. Others (25%) stated that they were in the profession because they enjoy instilling strong educational foundations in

today's youths, while 5% said it's a learning experience for themselves and 5% claimed that it felt like they were caring for their siblings again.

When asked if the male teachers thought that the images they presented were similar or different to those of their female counterparts, responses were close between very much the same, very different, and not even noticeable to them, for various reasons. 30% stated that giving the children a proper education is the only important thing. 20% claim that they never gave much thought about the image they present. 20% claim that they see male teachers as being stricter than female teachers, 15% say that everyone is unique, regardless of gender. 10% claim that men can be just as loving and gentle as women, while 5% didn't respond to this part of the question. When asked what image each one of the teachers thinks he presents to his students, 40% said a very respectable teacher, 35% said they were a positive male role model, 15% said that they were very approachable to their students, 5% said that they were more liberal than their female counterparts, and 5% feel that they seem strange to students and parents. When asked how important they felt this image is, 30% said that the image can help reinforce the child's education, 25% said that image helps create respect in the classroom. 20% of those who responded stated that it helps them bond with their students, 20% also said that their image shows that males are just as capable as females in the classroom, and 5% didn't respond to that part.

The teachers were asked to choose an image that they present, and the majority chose gentle or fatherly over images like macho and feminine. To follow up this response, 35% of the respondents said the fatherly image is the most natural, 25% said that one's

gentle nature must come out to be a teacher, 20% said that image doesn't matter, you just have to be a person who cares. 15% claim that they come across as a Big Brother, role model image, while 5% think that they appear macho on the outside, but are really gentle on the inside. All who were asked had feelings about a parents role in their teaching experience. 35% said that the parents support the teacher in their endeavors, 25% said that parents support their children in their educational goals, 20% decided that the parents had no affect on their teaching, and 10% said both that they form a partnership with the teacher and that they create a comparative for the male role model figure in the lives of the students.

Nearly all of the surveyed teachers agreed that teachers could be just as, or even more influential, than the child's parents, but for different reasons. 35% said that because some students come from lacking home lives, that teachers can really be strong parental figures. 30% agreed that both play an influential part in children's lives. 15% decided that teachers can be such positive role models, 10% claim that teachers can sometimes listen to students more carefully, and 10% think that teachers give an outside point of view. Half of the teachers said that the teacher's gender has no affect on how much the child learns, while the other half felt differently. 35% of them all said that just being a good teacher is all that matters, 30% stated that the students are too young to be affected by the difference. 10% said that it does make a difference because teachers of young children are the most influential, while 25% didn't elaborate on how they felt.

When asked how these teachers think their gender affects their role as an early childhood educator, 25% said it's not an issue, 25% said that there are certain trust issues

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with being male in the field, 15% feel that the students don't' care what gender they are, so it shouldn't matter to them, 10% think that sometimes communication is strained because of gender, and 25% didn't even address this very important question. As far as role model image goes, 30% claim that they are a positive male image, 25% claim that giving a good education is more important than image, 15% claim that they appear as a friend to students, 10% say that they reflect family values, and 25% didn't answer.

As a male in early childhood education, 30% think that there are more advantages for females in the field, 25% think there are more disadvantages for females, and 45% agree that there are no more advantages or disadvantages for males or females. When asked what the greatest advantage to being a male teacher is, 40% said it was the self-satisfaction they find in their career; this was slowly followed up by the students' appraisal. 35% said they just want to be the best teacher they can be. 15% said that gender has nothing to do with it. 15% said that the job provides them with self-pride, 10% said that helping a child is the most rewarding thing, while 25% didn't answer. Only a few teachers said that the students' reactions, the other teachers' reactions, the parents' reactions, or the administrations' reactions to be the greatest disadvantage to being a male teacher. 35% agreed that it is tough having to prove yourself, 30% said that unfamiliarity is an issue, 10% decided that there are trust issues, and 10% don't like that it causes them to have doubt in their abilities. 25% didn't answer.

If they were to leave the profession of early childhood education, 60% said it would be because of the low pay, 35% didn't know, 5% said it would be because of the suspicions he has to deal with being a male. As a male teacher, 35% say that the parents

are the hardest to win over, 15% say that the administration is the hardest, 10% say the students, 5% say the female teachers, and 35% said none of these. 80% of those who answered said that students basically don't treat them any differently because they are male. To elaborate on that, 30% think they show males more respect, 25% think they show females more respect, 20% think that students may sometimes be frightened of male teachers, 10% say kids think maybe they can get away with more from male teachers, and 15% didn't answer.

When asked if the male teachers ever felt that they were under suspicion because of their gender, 50% say they never have, 15% say they have, and 35% say they don't know. 15% think female teachers see male teachers to be at a disadvantage, 35% don't, and 45% don't know. 5% didn't answer. In fact, 35% notice absolutely no difference, 25% think that female teachers are supportive, 10% think they really feel bad for male teachers, and 20% didn't answer.

60% of responding males think that the ratio of elementary teachers should be half male, half female, 10% think there should be more female teachers, 30% didn't answer. When asked what they think women are more accepting of, 30% said the salary, 5% said the behavior of the children, 5% said the behavior of the parents, 5% said handling the teaching material, 20% said some of the above, 10% said none of the above, 10% didn't answer. When asked what they think men are more accepting of, 5% said the salary, 20% said the behavior of the children, 15% said the behavior of the parents, 25% said some of the above, and 35% said none of the above.

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65% of respondents thought that the motherly image of women in the field was important because women are natural caregivers (40%), women understand children better (25%), women are a trusting figure(15%), children who come from bad home need a mother figure (10%), and no reason (10%). 30% said that they don't think the motherly image is too important, and 5% don't know. 65% think that the fatherly image of men in the field is important because of lack of good homes (35%), boys can relate to a male teacher (20%), parents can appreciate help from males (10%), they can give a positive image (30%), no answer (5%). Almost all who answered feel that they always knew they were meant to be in this profession (80%), particularly because they like working with children. The others didn't know. 30 % think parents are uncomfortable with male teachers, 40% think they're not, 25% don't know, and 5% didn't answer. 25% of those who answered think the field is dominated by females because they are historically accepted in the role, 30% because they have a more caring nature, 20% because of the salary, 5% said that women are generally more interested in the profession, and 25% didn't answer. And, finally, when asked what can be done to encourage more men to enter the field, 45% said to offer more money, 15% said guidance counselors should push it more, 10% said they're not sure, 25% thought there should be more support in general, and 5% didn't answer.

Conclusions

I chose a topic I was connected to. Being a male teacher in elementary education, I am very interested in the role males play in the profession, the advantages and disadvantages of being a male in the profession, and the reasons why the profession

continues to be dominated by females. The information I obtained was often consistent with my own opinions and experiences, which led me to think a great deal about the path I have chosen in life. I feel that my eyes were opened to certain aspects of the field that I am in. I learned something from the opinions of my peers. Being a minority in the profession, it is interesting to see how other males in the profession feel about their positions as well. It is also interesting to see the different points of view and opinions they each bring to the topic; i.e. what their roles are, how they feel about the students, how they feel about the parents, how they feel about the other teachers.

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